

Xian Zhang Conducts Mahler's Symphony No. 3

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 3

Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 3 is a nature work, embracing the composer's passion for the outdoors. His correspondence provides a thorough chronicle of the symphony's progress. This excerpt from a June 1896 letter to his friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner describes the introduction to the first movement but captures much of the essence of the complete work.

It has almost ceased to be music; it is hardly anything but sounds of Nature. It's eerie, the way life gradually breaks through, out of soulless, petrified matter. (I might equally well have called the movement 'What the mountain rocks tell me.') And, as this life rises from stage to stage, it takes on ever more highly developed forms: flowers, beasts, man, up to the sphere of the spirits, the 'angels.' Once again, an atmosphere of brooding summer midday heat hangs over the introduction . . . ; not a breath stirs, all life is suspended, and the sun-drenched air trembles and vibrates. I hear it in my inner ear, but how to find the right notes for it?

Shortly after Mahler completed this work, the celebrated conductor Bruno Walter visited him in the Salzkammergut, and greatly admired the magnificent alpine setting. Mahler declared, "No need to look up there — I've already composed all that." Evidently, he found all the right notes.

Music Director Xian Zhang has chosen the Mahler Third for these early March concerts, which hold the promise of spring by month end. Man and nature are at the heart of all Mahler's symphonies. The mighty Symphony No. 3 delivers that message with dignity and beauty.

Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 3

Gustav Mahler

Born: July 7, 1860 in Kalischt, Bohemia

Died: May 18, 1911 in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1893-1896; revised 1906

World Premiere: June 9, 1902 in Krefeld, Germany at the Festival of Allgemeiner deutscher Musickverein.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1986-87 season, Hugh Wolff conducting

Duration: 110 minutes

Instrumentation: 4 flutes (all doubling piccolo); 4 oboes, (4th doubling English horn), 4 B-flat clarinets (3rd doubling bass clarinet, 4th doubling E-flat clarinet), E-flat clarinet; 4 bassoons (4th doubling contrabassoon); 8 horns, 4 trumpets (one doubling an offstage posthorn, an ancestor of the valved cornet), 4 trombones, tuba; 2 sets of timpani, glockenspiel, tambourine, cymbals, side drum, triangle, bass drum, chimes, tam tam, rute [a birch or wire brush]; 2 harps; women's chorus, children's' chorus, mezzo-soprano solo and strings

Summertime inspiration: the sounds of the great outdoors

Gustav Mahler loved the outdoors. Nature's beauty delighted him. He treasured long walks in the countryside where he could observe nature's power and magic. This was particularly true during the summers, when he customarily escaped from the hubbub of the city and his conducting responsibilities to a secluded country retreat. There he could commune with nature and concentrate on composition.

Between 1891 and 1897, Mahler conducted both opera and symphony in Hamburg, Northern Germany's largest city. Between seasons, in the breathtaking valleys of the Salzkammergut in the Austrian alps, he immersed himself in composing, for which there was little time during the performance season. Summer brought him peace and seclusion. Inevitably the sounds of nature found their way into his music. The large orchestras of Mahler's symphonies stem, in part, from his desire to approximate the sounds that so enthralled him: songs of the birds, wind rustling in leaves, sheep bleating, church bells pealing, and the popular music of rural Austria.

Mahler's "Pastoral"

From its inception, the Third Symphony was Mahler's expression of his love for nature; more than one critic has called it his "Pastoral" Symphony. Yet it is not entirely bucolic. Mahler

focuses on nature's power and occasional harshness as well as its beauty. Writing to his mistress Anna von Mildenburg in August 1896, Mahler reported:

My symphony is going to be something the likes of which the world has not yet heard. All nature is voiced therein, and it tells of deeply mysterious matters . . . I tell you, at certain passages I myself sometimes am overcome with an uncanny feeling, and can hardly believe that I could have written them.

His original titles for the symphony's movements were:

1. Summer marches in
2. What the flowers of the meadow tell me
3. What the animals of the forest tell me
4. What night tells me
5. What the morning bells tell me
6. What love tells me

These titles changed several times. Initially, Mahler planned seven movements, but dropped the seventh. (It became the finale to his Symphony No. 4). Over the course of the four summers he labored on the Symphony No. 3, from 1893 to 1896, Mahler rethought his conception. As Michael Kennedy has pointed out, the titles are no more than guidelines: "the [Third] Symphony is an exultant celebration of life, physical and spiritual, sensuous and animal." Mahler's eventual German and Italian movement titles are conventional musical directives, rather than his initial romantic imaginings. They provide interpretive and tempo guidance, not programmatic inspiration. As was his custom, he filled the score with many additional expressive remarks, along with detailed suggestions to the conductor.

Winter to summer: the cycle of renewal

Mahler's biographer Deryck Cooke describes the first movement of the Third Symphony as "the most original and flabbergasting thing Mahler ever conceived." It is undeniably arresting. A commanding horn melody opens the symphony eight horns strong, leaving us little doubt about Mahler's perception of the sweep and power of nature. Ironically, Mahler hoped to have a lighter first movement, one that showed his sense of humor; however, he composed the opening movement after completing the other five movements. It turned out to be rather portentous.

The formidable strength of the brasses at the front end may be construed as the cruelty of winter. Summer's gentle minions find their stride in subtler ways, and the dark forces of winter

do not yield their seasonal hold easily. Therein lies the struggle in Mahler's musical evocation of nature's greatest miracle, the annual cycle of rebirth. Describing the first movement to his friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner, wrote:

"Summer marches in" will be the Prologue. Right away I need a regimental band Naturally, they don't get by without a battle with the opposing force, winter, but he is soon thrown out of the ring, and summer, in his full strength and superiority, soon seizes undisputed leadership.

A giant opening movement balanced by shorter ones

Before he abandoned the programmatic references altogether, Mahler arrived at the right description for the "introduction": "Pan's Awakening" followed by "Summer Marches In." Because it is so long (more than half an hour), the opening movement provides a natural divider for the Third Symphony into two parts, with the other five movements comprising the second part.

Mahler recognized the need for some relief after the dramatic tension of his opening. That is one reason that all the middle movements are relatively short. The second movement, a minuet, is markedly delicate in comparison to the first, with lighter scoring that emphasizes woodwinds more than brass. It was the first of the six movements to be performed, in November 1896, and became popular. Mahler regarded it as an Intermezzo in the whole, and was distressed when conductors took to programming it independently of the rest of the symphony.

We hear Mahler at his most lighthearted in the third movement, Comodo; Scherzando; Ohne Hast. He based this movement on "Ablösung im Sommer," one of the earliest (1887-1890) of his songs based on Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano's early 19th-century folk collection, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* [*The Youth's Magic Horn*]. Folk dances and country melodies dominate, while Mahler's effective orchestration draws a mocking aural picture of the crises, joys and practical jokes at a rustic village celebration. His musical ethos bears a firm Austrian imprint here. Mahler celebrated the commonplace, rather than apologizing for it. One section toward the end is marked grob [coarse, rude], almost emphasizing the humble inspiration of the music. "It is as if Nature herself were pulling faces and putting out her tongue," he told Natalie Bauer-Lechner.

Sequential finale: three linked movements

The final three movements of the Third Symphony are played without pause, which reinforces their thematic and spiritual relationship to one another. In the fourth movement, the first slow segment in the symphony, Mahler introduces the mezzo-soprano soloist. Her text, by Friedrich Nietzsche, raises questions about destiny, existence, and the relationship between joy and pain, day and night: heady material, from which Mahler does not shy.

After the profound questions raised by the first mezzo-soprano solo, the children's choir sings the delightful "Bimm-bamm" chorus. They sound a positive reaffirmation of life, youth, and life after death. With the women's chorus, the angels join the church bells. Once again Mahler draws on the texts of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. With admirable brevity, he reveals an entire drama to us in the space of a few moments. The chorus is one of Mahler's most successful movements, joining myriad performing forces with a light touch and a sure hand.

Eloquent Adagio: Mahler's ultimate artistic expression

For Mahler, an Adagio was not a psychological point of repose or regeneration. It was a climax, the vehicle for the most profound expression of reverence and spiritual devotion. In short, it was the highest form of art. Ultimately he was an instrumental composer, and for a conclusion to this monumental symphony the eloquence of the orchestra was the only appropriate forum for his finale. Both choruses and the mezzo-soprano soloist are silent for the heartfelt last movement. Mahler's orchestral sound shimmers, growing in a power that first matches and eventually surpasses that of the opening movement. For Mahler, love was a more powerful force even than nature; spiritual love was the mightiest of all. One cannot help but think of Bruckner and of Beethoven, particularly the Beethoven of the late quartets, when we listen to this achingly emotional and exultant close.

Mahler conducted the premiere of his Third Symphony in June 1902, only three months after his marriage to Alma Schindler, but six years after he had finished composing it. By then he was music director of the Vienna Opera. Despite a rocky rehearsal period, the performance in the German city of Crefeld was a success, doing much to secure Mahler's reputation as a symphonist outside Vienna. The Third Symphony became quite popular in Germany, but never found a receptive public in Vienna during the composer's lifetime. One critic wrote that Mahler "deserved a few years in gaol" after the symphony's Viennese premiere. Mahler was bitterly accustomed to such scornful treatment of his compositions by the Viennese press; nevertheless he remained dissatisfied with the Third Symphony and revised it extensively in 1906. We hear that version at these performances.